

Unfinished Business

School Desegregation in Kentucky

A Symposium Marking the 50th Anniversary of
Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas

March 30, 2004 • Kentucky History Center • Frankfort, Kentucky



**We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine
of separate but equal has no place. Separate educational
facilities are inherently unequal.**

Chief Justice Earl Warren
Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, May 17, 1954

This symposium is sponsored in partnership with the

Kentucky Historical Society Foundation

Kentucky Department of Education

Kentucky Education Cabinet

Center of Excellence for the Study of Kentucky African Americans, Kentucky
State University

Kentucky Commission on Human Rights

**We would like to thank the members of the program committee for their
contributions in planning this event.**

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Presented by the Kentucky Historical Society

Fifty years ago the United States Supreme Court ruled unanimously in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* that school segregation based on race was unconstitutional. This landmark decision was a turning point for race relations in the United States, changing forever how children would be educated and laying a foundation for achieving social justice in other areas of African American life. The fiftieth anniversary provides the nation with an opportunity to reflect upon the historical importance and educational legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

“Unfinished Business: School Desegregation in Kentucky” is sponsored by the Kentucky Historical Society and the Kentucky Oral History Commission in order to advance understanding of the history of desegregation and offer perspective on the continuing challenge of achieving equal educational opportunity. The symposium is a program of the Kentucky Civil Rights Movement Oral History Project. The purpose of the project is to document the struggle to end legal segregation in the commonwealth through the collection of oral history interviews and to develop educational programming based on these primary sources that will enhance knowledge of the civil rights movement in Kentucky.

There was never a time when we were pushed or hit; it was just verbal abuse. After the first year, even that stopped because it was evident then that we weren't going anywhere. We were there to stay.

Alice Wilson, Mayfield
Integrated Mayfield High School in 1956

Keynote Speakers

Linda Brown Thompson and Cheryl Brown Henderson

Linda Brown was eight years old when her father, working with the NAACP, joined with twelve other families to sue the Topeka Board of Education over segregation of the public school system. By the time the *Brown* case reached the U.S. Supreme Court, it was combined with four other school desegregation cases brought by the NAACP in South Carolina, Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Delaware. The combined cases became known as *Oliver L. Brown et al. v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a unanimous decision that separating children in public schools because of race was unconstitutional and violated the 14th amendment to the U.S. Constitution.



Linda Brown Thompson

On March 30, Linda Brown Thompson and her sister Cheryl Brown Henderson will chronicle the history of their family's participation in the court decision and its impact on education and the civil rights movement.

Linda has been a Head Start teacher and is currently program associate with the Brown Foundation. The sisters are co-owners of Brown and Brown Associates, an educational consulting firm. Cheryl co-founded the Brown Foundation for Educational Equity, Excellence and Research in 1988. Since its establishment, this non-profit organization has provided scholarships to minority students, presented awards to local, state, and national leaders, and sponsored programs on multicultural understanding. Cheryl is currently executive director of the Brown Foundation. Her career in education includes being a 6th-grade teacher, university guest lecturer, school guidance counselor, and state educational administrator. She serves on several professional boards and civic organizations and is a member of the *Brown v. Board of Education* 50th Anniversary Presidential Commission.



Cheryl Brown Henderson

The Brown sisters appear through DPK and Associates, Inc.

John Jackson



As the NAACP national director of education, Dr. John Jackson is charged with leading the education advocacy agenda for the oldest and largest civil rights organization in the world. Jackson is primarily responsible for directing the Association's 2,200 adult, college, and youth units in the implementation of an advocacy agenda focused on closing the achievement gap by ensuring resource equity, increasing parental involvement, improving teacher quality, and building state and local collaborative networks.

At age 31, Dr. Jackson is the youngest director of education in the NAACP's 94-year history. He has earned five education degrees from the University of Louisiana, University of Illinois College of Education and College of Law, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he earned a doctorate of education in administration, planning, and social policy. Prior to joining the NAACP, Jackson was appointed by President Bill Clinton to the Office for Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education. He also worked as a program analyst at the U.S. Department of Labor, where he served as a liaison between the Department of Labor and the White House Initiative for historically black colleges and universities.

We had approximately 30 some teachers, black teachers, at High Street, and when they closed the high school, all of those teachers lost their jobs except six of us who were allowed to go to Bowling Green High School.

Herbert Oldham, Bowling Green

Symposium Schedule

8:30 a.m. – 8:45 a.m. **Welcome and Opening Remarks**

Presiding: **Kent Whitworth**, Executive Director, Kentucky Historical Society

Opening Remarks: **William Turner**, Interim President, Kentucky State University

Remarks: **Kim Lady Smith**, Director, Kentucky Oral History Commission

Looking Back, 1900 – 1970

8:45 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

The program begins with a look back at events in Kentucky prior to the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education*, followed by the stories of those who were among the first to integrate Kentucky schools. The role of Kentuckian Fred Vinson, chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court from 1946 to 1953, will be presented, as will Kentucky's efforts to desegregate schools prior to and immediately after *Brown v. Board*.

Building the Case for School Desegregation

Moderator: **Tracy K'Meyer**, University of Louisville

Jim St. Clair, Indiana University Southeast — St. Clair is an associate professor of journalism at Indiana University Southeast. He is coauthor of the book *Chief Justice Fred. M. Vinson of Kentucky, A Political Biography*.

Gerald Smith, University of Kentucky — Smith is an associate professor of African American history and director of the African American Studies and Research Program at the University of Kentucky. He has published two books on African American life in Kentucky and is currently writing *A Concise History of the African American Experience in Kentucky*.

9:45 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. **Break**

10:00 a.m. – 10:15 a.m. **Governor's Remarks**

Introduction: **James Host**, Secretary, Kentucky Commerce Cabinet

Remarks: **The Honorable Ernie Fletcher**, Governor, Commonwealth of Kentucky

We Who Were First: The Experience of Desegregation

Moderator: **John Hardin**, Western Kentucky University

James Howard — In 1956 at the age of 13, Howard was one of nine black students who attempted to integrate the all-white Sturgis High School. White resistance became violent and the National Guard was called in. It would be another year before the school was integrated. Howard graduated from Sturgis in 1960 and later from Oklahoma State University. He is currently the executive director of the state agency in Oklahoma that conducts administrative hearings, arbitration, and mediation for over 30,000 state employees.

Doris Wilkinson — Wilkinson, a graduate from Dunbar High School in Lexington, was a member of the freshman class of African Americans that entered the University of

Kentucky in 1954. She completed her undergraduate training in 3 ½ years and went on to Case Western Reserve University, where she received her M.A. and Ph.D. In 1967, Wilkinson was the first African American woman to be hired as a full-time regular faculty member at the University of Kentucky.

Louis Stout — Stout graduated from Cynthiana High School, an all-black school, in 1959. He attended St. Regis College in Denver, Colorado, on a basketball scholarship, returning to Kentucky to teach and coach at Dunbar High School in Lexington in 1965. Dunbar closed in 1967 and Stout became a teacher and assistant coach (later head coach) at Tates Creek High School in Lexington. In 1994, Stout was named commissioner of the Kentucky High School Athletic Association, the first African American in the nation to head up a state high-school athletic association.

11:30 a.m. – 12:15 p.m. **Lunch**

12:15 p.m. – 1:30 p.m.

Keynote Presentation

Introduction: **Anne Butler**, Director of the Center of Excellence for the Study of Kentucky African Americans, Kentucky State University

Presentation of Senate Citation: **The Honorable Gerald A. Neal**, Senator, Commonwealth of Kentucky

The History and Legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*

Linda Brown Thompson and Cheryl Brown Henderson

1:30 p.m. – 1:45 p.m. **Break**

Moving Forward, 1970 – 2004

1:45 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.

The afternoon sessions address the continuing struggle to achieve educational equity. After more than two decades of gradual school integration, the 1970s brought new challenges with controversies over busing, changes in the Supreme Court, and debate over how best to provide for equal educational opportunity. Panelists consider the troubled history, the obstacles, and the opportunities for achieving equality in education in Kentucky.

Community in Crisis: Busing for Integration in Jefferson County

Moderator: **J. Blaine Hudson**, University of Louisville

Suzy Post — A lifelong advocate for equity issues, Post was president of the ACLU of Kentucky which filed the lawsuit that resulted in a 1975 busing plan to desegregate Jefferson County and Louisville schools. She was the only white plaintiff in the suit and had five children in public schools at that time. She was monitor of the lawsuit after 1975 while employed by the Louisville and Jefferson County Human Relations Commission.

Benitha Ellis — Ellis was a founding member and leader of the United Black Protective Parents organization that formed in 1975 in Jefferson County in order to focus attention on the treatment of black children on the buses and in the classrooms. Members took their concerns to state and federal political leaders, the Jefferson County Board of Education, and federal court in addition to helping children at bus stops and in the schools.

2:45 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. **Break**

Equal Educational Opportunity: The Challenge Continues

Moderator: **Beverly Watts**, Exec. Director, Kentucky Commission on Human Rights

Aukram Burton — Burton is a diversity and multicultural education specialist in Jefferson County Public Schools' Department of Equity and Poverty Issues. His experience includes working as a high-school teacher and administrator for ten years in Boston Public Schools in Massachusetts, and as director of minority student achievement for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina.

Renee Scott — As program manager for the Kentucky Department of Education's Division of Exceptional Children Services, Scott's varied responsibilities include serving on the Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board and as co-principal investigator for the Kentucky State Improvement Grant. One of her recent publications focused on addressing the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education.

3:30 p.m.

Keynote Presentation

Introduction: **Beverly Watts**, Exec. Director, Kentucky Commission on Human Rights

Dr. John Jackson, NAACP National Education Director

We found out very quickly that it was going to be very different and that race was going to be an issue every day of our lives. The thing that I had to come to grips with was, if I was going to stay here and survive, I was going to have to find a way to cope with being black and being at UK.

Chester Grundy, Lexington
University of Kentucky student, 1965



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School buses damaged by protesters stand in the parking lot at Southern High School, 1975.

This riot just raged across the south part of the county. Rocks being thrown in the windows of filling stations that sold gas to school buses. Automobile tires being burned. A police officer had his eye shot out and there was a very determined effort to storm one of our bus compounds, which would have meant burning the buses.

The plan provided designated protest areas at every school where the parents could come, or the people opposed could come. They could bring their signs, be in sight of the school, but not close enough to interfere with the ingress and egress of the students or with buses unloading or loading. Protesters could yell obscene things about me and hold up their signs and do whatever they wanted as long as they were peaceable. I never disturbed that until, at Fairdale, they came out of the protest area and threw rocks at a bus loaded with black children, little children from the lower grades. The protesters attacked this bus, threw bricks and broke the windows.

Judge James Gordon, Louisville
Responsible for the implementation of the 1975 school
desegregation plan in Louisville and Jefferson County.



Photo by Myron Davis/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

Crowd yelling as African American students are escorted into school by National Guardsmen during integration of the schools in Sturgis, Kentucky, September 1956.

I was spat on. I had eggs thrown on me, tomatoes thrown on me. I was hit with rocks. I was kicked. I was pushed. I was shoved. It wasn't just whether I felt I was in danger, it was real. Had they (state police and National Guard) not been there, we would have clearly been seriously harmed.

I can recall going into the principal's office to pick up something. And one of the children asked me, are they going to make you take a test? Aren't all you guys going to have to take a test to see if you are worthy of being here at Sturgis? I recall saying that I will take any test that you take. I'm willing to compete with anyone else who is willing to take an examination. It inspired something in me to want to be able to demonstrate that while I may not have had the same opportunities academically to learn, that given the same opportunities, I believed that I would be able to demonstrate that I was just as capable and just as competent as anyone else.

James Howard, Sturgis
Integrated Sturgis High School in 1956

Directions

The Kentucky History Center (headquarters of the Kentucky Historical Society) is located at 100 W. Broadway in the heart of downtown Frankfort. Parking is available directly across from the History Center on the corner of Broadway and Ann Street and behind the Center in the public parking lot bounded by Clinton and High Streets. For more detailed directions and a map visit history.ky.gov.



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Second-grade class at Lowe Elementary School in eastern Jefferson County, September 11, 1975.

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The Kentucky Historical Society is an agency of the Kentucky Commerce Cabinet.



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